

Find of the Year

Melanie Aspey, Archivist at the Rothschild Archive, describes a newly acquired photographic key which has unlocked many Rothschild identities.

An album of photographs largely attributed to one of France's most prominent commercial photographers of the 1860s, Eugène Disdéri (1819-1889) attracted a good deal of attention among collectors of photographs when it came up for sale in a specialist auction at Christie's of London in May 1999. The three hundred or so photographs, primarily in the form of *cartes de visite*, had been carefully and accurately identified. Its successful acquisition on behalf of the Archive has therefore provided a key to the secrets of the identities of many portraits in numerous albums of photographs already held in the collection.

The unknown compiler of the album – possibly the 'HD' whose initials form the metallic decoration on the front of the binding – had a thorough knowledge of the Rothschilds' family and social circle. Besides the family members themselves, the album features agents, like the Davidsons, Weisweiler, Bauer; clients, such as

the French royal family; and more distant relatives, Schnappers, Worms, Helberts for example.

Of particular interest is the only known photographic image of Charlotte, Baroness Lionel de Rothschild ever to have come to light. An image of 'Mrs Helbert', an elderly lady, is almost certainly that of Adelaide, née Cohen, Hannah Rothschild's sister; she bears a striking similarity to the portrait of the younger Hannah by Sir William Beechey. Benjamin Davidson, a cousin of the Rothschilds who established the San Francisco agency, is also seen for the first time

The inevitable fading of the images themselves can be overcome to a certain degree by re-photographing each item through a blue filter. This and other options for the care of the album are being discussed with the Archive's consultant photographic conservator.



Miss Evelina de Rothschild



Portrait by Disdéri of Mrs Helbert, sister of Hannah Rothschild (née Cohen)

The department of prints of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris recently acquired the studio collection of Eugène Disdéri by public auction. Professor Elizabeth Anne McCauley, currently working on a biography of Disdéri, discusses the period in Industrial Madness: commercial photography in Paris 1848-1871 (Yale University Press, 1994).